

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 19, Chapter 13 END

Today we'll wrap up our study of Nehemiah and in doing so bring us (essentially) to the end of the Old Testament from a chronological perspective. This book, at its closing, brings us near to 400 B.C. The only other writings that are considered inspired that cover the period after 400 B.C., until the opening of the Book of Matthew and the birth of Christ, are the Apocrypha and even then these are considered by the Jews and by most Christian branches as to be of a lesser inspiration than the 66 books that we find in the typical Protestant Bible. Therefore, after centuries of debate, in the early 1800's the British and American Bible Societies decided to remove the books of Apocrypha from Protestant Bibles altogether; but doing this also created a 4 century historical gap between the closing of the Old Testament and the opening of the New Testament. They labeled this newly created gap "The Silent Period". Of course as I've explained on a few occasions, that period is anything but silent. It deals with the end of the Persian Empire, followed by the rise of the Greek and then the Roman Empires.

So if you've followed Torah Class from the beginning, then you started with Creation in Genesis; we moved on to the establishment of the Hebrew people with Abraham, then to their enslavement in Egypt, their rescue and trek to the Promised Land of Canaan, the establishment of a sovereign Hebrew nation under David, it's dissolution through civil war into 2 separately governed Kingdoms, both Kingdoms eventually being exiled by God to foreign lands due to their rebellion against Him, and finally in Ezra and Nehemiah the return of the inhabitants (the Jews) of one of those two kingdoms, Judah, to their homeland.

It has taken over 10 years for us to cover this territory, so it is easy to lose continuity. In order to help connect it all, to see these many centuries of Bible history horizon to horizon, starting next week we'll go on a relatively brief few week study starting with Abraham that will take us to the end of the OT, then follow the progress of the Hebrews through the NT, and finally see how it leads to modern day 21st century Israel. After that we'll study what I consider to be a wonderful bridge that connects the Old and New Testaments, the Tanach and the B'rit Hadashah, in a very Hebrew way, the Book of Acts.

Last week in Nehemiah 13 we closed at verse 14. Chapter 13 is about the return of Nehemiah from Babylon after he had been summoned to Artaxerxes' palace. Nehemiah had been allowed to stay in Judah for 12 years before being recalled and had accomplished the impossible. And before he left, Nehemiah, in co-operation with Ezra, had instituted many reforms to both the religious institution and lay sectors of Jewish society in Judah. Jerusalem was in an upswing economically since the defensive wall and many homes had been rebuilt.

The city's population had been fortified by means of a lottery in which 1 out of 10 Jewish families in Judah were required to relocate to Jerusalem. And all the Jews, leaders and common citizens, had sworn an oath never to abandon the Temple of God. From a practical standpoint this meant to support it properly with their incomes; because otherwise those Priests and Levites who depended on the tithes for a living would have to abandon their posts to survive in some other way.

Unfortunately it seems that in no time after Nehemiah left society regressed on every level. The first disheartening thing we read about is in verse 4 when we learn that a Priest who was in charge of the Temple storehouses had become related by marriage to Toviyah, a foreigner and arch-enemy of Nehemiah. This treasonous relationship led to the Priest **Elyashiv** giving some of the Temple store rooms to Toviyah for his personal use. These rooms had been designated as store rooms for the food brought in to support the Levites and Priests; apparently that had something to do with the next thing we learned, which is that the lay folks stopped tithing. Here we see the upside and the downside of leadership. When Nehemiah was here, he provided an exemplary example of Godly, Torah obedient living. He practiced what he preached. But when he left, those who had authority and were supposed to take over as leadership, such as the High Priest (another but different Elyashiv from the one who was running the Temple storehouses), showed that they had no business trying to lead others as they committed the very wrongs that they had only a few months earlier spoken against.

No doubt while attending to the King up in Babylon, Nehemiah got word that everything back in Judah was unraveling. It is hard to know how long Nehemiah was away; we get no time markers. However when we see the description of some of the things that were happening, they seem like things that took time to develop and couldn't have happened in weeks or even a few months. I suspect that he was gone for 3 years and probably a bit more (but that's my speculation). And if we were to further speculate on something that isn't really stated, but begs us to use some common sense, what was it that started the ball rolling downhill so fast after Nehemiah's departure? How did things get out of control so quickly and so seriously? In my view it was no different then than in modern times: turn away from God's Word and very quickly confusion takes over.

James 1:23-24 CJB

²³ For whoever hears the Word but doesn't do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror, ²⁴ who looks at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

I think this must be the case because that is the tone that the editor of Nehemiah sets and it is because history shows us that while we'll get some bad national leaders from time to time who

will make bad decisions and try to lead the people wrongly, if the religious institutions are working as they should and they are teaching the people to discern right from wrong, then soon the bad leaders are replaced by better ones. But when the religious institutions cease doing their jobs by teaching God's Word then bad leadership goes unchecked because the people look to them as what must be the examples of civil behavior and morality since they know no better.

As we read in Nehemiah 13, the religious leadership has failed and its wickedness quickly spread to every level of Jewish society in the same way that a line of dominos collapses simply from the impetus of the first one in line leaning against the next one. A Godly society cannot be led astray by bad civil leadership unless the religious leadership fails to do its job. And when a society fails the FIRST thing needed to restore it is for the religious leadership to step up and re-establish the preeminence of the Lord and His principles and commandments. That is why Ezra came before Nehemiah to rebuild the Temple and reform the Priesthood.

As we look around ourselves in the 21st century we see this same pattern at play once again. Western society has collapsed into confusion. We have had poor civil leadership for a long time now, and with each election cycle it seems we descend further and further into chaos and immorality hoping the next leader can both give us everything we want, and to fix everything so we feel more secure. How did this happen? A failure at the pulpit. Our Christian institutions long ago adopted manmade traditions and laid aside the commandments of God as our governing behavioral and moral platform. Each succeeding generation Christian (and Jewish) traditions are made more compatible with whatever direction our civil leadership wishes to take us, rather than acting as a touchstone and a backstop. Rather than teaching God's Word to Believing congregations to give them truth, light and discernment, the goal has become prosperity, popularity, peace and love at all costs (and peace and love itself undergo constant redefinition). Our best known Christian leaders appear on television and demand private jets, multiple mansions, and promise vast wealth to those who will follow them and their plan. The goal of their vision is not to be a check on civil leadership and societal values; the goal is to win the approval of each successive administration of civil leadership and the sheep that follow them blindly.

Upon Nehemiah's exit Judah collapsed into deprivation and sin once again because the Temple authorities had collapsed into deprivation and sin. The West especially has become a cesspool of immorality and spiritual darkness because our Judeo-Christian religious leadership has led its people into immorality and spiritual darkness. And naturally all of this has happened in the name of God. Let those who have ears, listen.

Let's move on to the conclusion of Nehemiah.

RE-READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 13:15 – end

It is fascinating how central the issue of Shabbat has been to Ezra and Nehemiah and none more so than the final passages to finish this book. It seems that observance of Sabbath is the thermometer that records the temperature of Jewish society. And why wouldn't it be; Shabbat was instituted by the Lord as a divine sign.

Exodus 31:13-17 CJB

¹³ "Tell the people of Isra'el, 'You are to observe my Shabbats; for this is a sign between me and you through all your generations; so that you will know that I am ADONAI, who sets you apart for me.

¹⁴ Therefore you are to keep my Shabbat, because it is set apart for you. Everyone who treats it as ordinary must be put to death; for whoever does any work on it is to be cut off from his people.

¹⁵ On six days work will get done; but the seventh day is Shabbat, for complete rest, set apart for ADONAI. Whoever does any work on the day of Shabbat must be put to death.

¹⁶ The people of Isra'el are to keep the Shabbat, to observe Shabbat through all their generations as a perpetual covenant.

¹⁷ It is a sign between me and the people of Isra'el forever; for in six days ADONAI made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day he stopped working and rested."

Shabbat IS the sign of a people set apart for God. Our observance of Shabbat signals that we are operating in harmony with God, and the lack of observance of Shabbat signals that we have fallen away from Him. But, as I'm regularly asked, HOW do we observe Shabbat? Although I feel like I've covered this before, and it has sadly become a bone of contention between Christians and Jewish Believers, I want to take a moment to reiterate something I said several weeks ago. The first thing we must understand is what Sabbath is in God's eyes, and then next what it is NOT because these two things are constantly confused as a result of manmade doctrines of both Judaism and Christianity. Shabbat is the ordained Day of Rest. There is no other definition of Sabbath in the Bible.

Exodus 20:8-11 CJB

⁸ "Remember the day, Shabbat, to set it apart for God.

⁹ You have six days to labor and do all your work,

¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Shabbat for ADONAI your God. On it, you are not to do any kind of work- not you, your son or your daughter, not your male or female slave, not your livestock, and not the foreigner staying with you inside the gates to your property.

¹¹ For in six days, ADONAI made heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. This is why ADONAI blessed the day, Shabbat, and separated it for himself.

We could go through every mention of Sabbath in the Bible and there is one thing that you will NEVER see Sabbath defined as: the Day of Worship. Sabbath is not the Day of Worship; it is the Day of Rest. In fact, especially in the Old Testament, we simply won't find any connection between Sabbath and worship. That of course isn't to say that we should NOT worship on Sabbath; and in fact I can't think of a better day to worship God than on Shabbat. But the reality is that we are to worship God each and every day, without exception. And the Bible designates no day as a better, or more required day, to worship than any other. And in point of fact, despite some Believers thinking otherwise, Judaism has NOT declared Shabbat as the official Jewish Day of Worship. The waters concerning Sabbath observance have been further muddied because in the 4th century A.D. the Roman Church declared two ground breaking Church doctrines: first, that Shabbat is hereby abolished. And second, in its place there WOULD be an official Day of Christian Worship, and it would be the 1st day of the week, Sunday. But just because some wrong minded Christian Bishops and the Emperor of Rome 1600 years ago tried to assert divine authority that they didn't have doesn't somehow mean that worshipping on Sunday is wrong. What is wrong is to declare the Sabbath as abolished, and to declare Sunday as THE exclusive Day of Worship, in the same way it is wrong for others to declare Saturday as THE exclusive Day of Worship. Such a thing exists only in the minds of men, not that of God, and it has caused terrible contentiousness that is not warranted.

This is why here in Nehemiah, and in a couple of other places I'll show to you, that the issue is rest versus continuing normal work on Shabbat; not whether one goes somewhere to an assembly to "worship" on the 7th day. So whether Jew or gentile Christian, in any age, as a Believer of the God of Israel, observing the 7th day, Shabbat, as a set-apart day of ceasing from our normal labors is the sign of trust and obedience and allegiance to Yehoveh. And it is not a tradition, it is God's command.

Thus in verse 15 of Nehemiah 13 we hear of some Jews who were operating winepresses, loading up donkeys with grain, and grapes, figs, and other produce obviously for the purpose of taking it to market. But they were doing it on Shabbat. In fact they were intent on bringing those goods to sell in Jerusalem, on Shabbat. This not only violated the direct Torah

Commandment not to do so, but it also broke the terms of the vow that the citizens of Judah had made just a few years earlier.

Nehemiah 10:32 CJB³² *"If the peoples of the lands bring merchandise or food to sell on Shabbat, we will not buy from them on Shabbat or on a holy day.*

On the other hand there were also foreigners who wanted to sell on Shabbat. Here they are described as people from Tzor. There was evidently a colony of Tyrians who lived in Judah. Tyrians (we could also call them Tzorians) were Phoenicians; famous shippers and traders. They had for centuries established far-flung trading networks and were commercial specialists. Nothing wrong with that and it only made sense that they would want an outpost here in Jerusalem. The problem is that the Jews had decided not to buy or sell on Sabbath because they had determined that this represented "regular work". Yet, was it work to "buy"? It would seem only normal work to "sell". Nonetheless this was the decision that these Jews had come to and vowed to uphold and now in no time they reversed themselves and did otherwise. This infuriated Nehemiah.

As early as the time of the Prophet Amos we find that it had become too hard for many Hebrews to forgo work on Sabbath. It just seemed like an interruption in their work flow and to their minds it interfered with profit making and productivity. I can sympathize; when I first became convicted that Shabbat was not optional, it probably took close to a year before I could get over the feeling of being antsy and "unproductive". And as my wife will attest my temperament is such that there is little worse for me than wasting time. That day represented 1/7th of a week; I had things to do and it just killed me to accomplish nothing because it was Sabbath. But now, I love Shabbat and can't wait for it to get here. It is like stepping into a long warm shower after several days of hard labor.

Amos 8:4-7 CJB

⁴ *Listen, you who swallow the needy and destroy the poor of the land!*

⁵ *You say, "When will Rosh-Hodesh be over, so we can market our grain? and Shabbat, so we can sell wheat?" You measure the grain in a small eifah, but the silver in heavy shekels, fixing the scales, so that you can cheat,*

⁶ *buying the needy for money and the poor for a pair of shoes, and sweeping up the refuse of the wheat to sell!"*

⁷ *ADONAI swears by Ya'akov's pride, "I will forget none of their deeds, ever.*

It is clear from the words of our passage in Nehemiah 13 that this attitude we heard Amos railing against was the same as some in Judah had concerning Shabbat. And it also is self-evident that the Priesthood did nothing to stop it. But the question also comes: is Sabbath only for Hebrews? Or even only for worshippers of the God of Israel? My answer to that question is that it is intended for everyone ever born.

On several occasions I have pointed out that Sabbath was instituted at Creation; not at Mt. Sinai. The Law from Mt. Sinai was not to **establish** Shabbat; it was to REMEMBER that Shabbat had long ago been established by God at Creation. And at Creation there were no separated nations or races or people groups of any kind. Shabbat is for all mankind.

^{CJB} **Genesis 2:1** *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, along with everything in them.*

² *On the seventh day God was finished with his work which he had made, so he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.*

³ *God blessed the seventh day and separated it as holy; because on that day God rested from all his work which he had created, so that it itself could produce.*

And to back up this idea of Shabbat as being seen by the Lord as a separate issue from the Torah Law, let's look briefly at another passage.

Ezekiel 20:11-13 CJB

¹¹ *I gave them my laws and showed them my rulings; if a person obeys them, he will have life through them.*

¹² *I gave them my Shabbats as a sign between me and them, so that they would know that I, ADONAI, am the one who makes them holy.*

¹³ *"But the house of Isra'el rebelled against me in the desert. They did not live by my laws; and they rejected my rulings, which, if a person does, he will have life through them; moreover, they greatly profaned my Shabbats. Then I said I would pour out my fury on them in the desert, in order to destroy them.*

Notice how the Lord speaks about the Laws, rulings, and Shabbat each as sort of separate categories of observances. And that is because Shabbat was given to mankind in general, not only to Israel and/or to those who worship the God of Israel. Shabbat is a big deal to God; so it

ought to be a big deal to us. And it certainly was to Nehemiah.

So continuing in Nehemiah 13:17 we find Nehemiah arguing with the aristocrats of Judah and telling them that he is not about to allow anything to occur that could defile the Shabbat because here they are only recently back from exile, still trying to put their lives back together, and their homeland is being ruled by a foreign potentate. And this is all because Israel broke God's Laws and in addition profaned the Sabbath. And they are doing it again!

Being a man of action and not just words, Nehemiah orders Levites to take over control of the gates of Jerusalem on Sabbath. And on the 6th day, as the sun gets low and the shadows grow long, the Levites are to instruct the gatekeepers to close the city gates. They are keeping the merchants out so there so that there will be no buying and selling on Shabbat. But that wasn't enough for Nehemiah. The sellers still hung around outside the gates, so Nehemiah told them to leave. And if they didn't he'd use violent force against them if necessary. Nehemiah took Shabbat seriously, and he knew firsthand the catastrophic consequences upon the Jews for violating God's Shabbat; as long as he could do something about it he wasn't go to let it happen again.

Then starting in verse 23 the old issue of Jews marrying foreign women surfaces again. And although Nehemiah chastised those who did this terrible thing, and made the other Judeans promise never to give their sons and daughters in marriage to foreigners, there was no dissolution of marriages ordered as happened back in the Book of Ezra. Interestingly there are 3 specific people groups of foreigners described here: people from Ashdod, from Amon and from Moab. Once again to be clear: this issue is not about foreign born people who converted to Judaism and then married into a Jewish family. This is about foreign born people who married into Jewish families but who stayed identified to their foreign nations and to their foreign gods. What is also interesting is the focus on the children who were the products of these illicit unions who spoke only in the foreign tongue of their mothers. Ashdod was Philistine territory so the language was Philistine. Now the languages of Moab and Ammon were Semitic and there would not have been a great deal of difference between that and what the common Jews spoke (likely Aramaic). But the language of the Temple was Hebrew (also a cousin language of Aramaic). So just the presence of these foreign languages upset Nehemiah to no end because it was further proof that everything that had been accomplished (so painfully in some cases) years earlier to separate the Jews from the pagans was now being undone.

In fact we have Nehemiah depicted as getting violent by beating some of these violators up, and by pulling out the hair of others to shame them. When we're told that Nehemiah cursed them it doesn't mean how we think of it: using bad language or swearing at them. The word curse is meant in a social/religious context; that is he did something very Middle Eastern in nature. He issued a curse against them, vowing that something bad would happen to them (caused by God) for allowing their sons and daughters to marry foreigners.

Nehemiah knew his history; he reminds them that even King Solomon did this wicked thing of marrying foreign women and although God loved him, nevertheless these foreign women made Shlomo sin and that sin compelled God, in His justice, to act severely against Solomon.

^{CJB} **1 Kings 11:1 King Shlomo loved many foreign women besides the daughter of Pharaoh. There were women from the Mo'avi, 'Amoni, Edomi, Tzidoni and Hitti-**

² nations about which ADONAI had said to the people of Isra'el, "You are not to go among them or they among you, because they will turn your hearts away toward their gods." But Shlomo was deeply attached to them by his love.

³ He had 700 wives, all princesses, and 300 concubines; and his wives turned his heart away.

⁴ For when Shlomo became old, his wives turned his heart away toward other gods; so that he was not wholehearted with ADONAI his God, as David his father had been.

⁵ For Shlomo followed 'Ashtoret the goddess of the Tzidoni and Milkom the abomination of the 'Amoni.

⁶ Thus Shlomo did what was evil in ADONAI's view and did not fully follow ADONAI, as David his father had done.

⁷ Shlomo built a high place for K'mosh the abomination of Mo'av on the hill on front of Yerushalayim, and another for Molekh the abomination of the people of 'Amon.

⁸ This is what he did for all his foreign wives, who then offered and sacrificed to their gods.

⁹ So ADONAI grew angry with Shlomo, because his heart had turned away from ADONAI the God of Isra'el, who had appeared to him twice

¹⁰ and given him orders concerning this matter that he should not follow other gods. But he didn't obey ADONAI's orders.

¹¹ So ADONAI said to Shlomo, "Since this is what has been in your mind, and you haven't kept my covenant and my regulations which I ordered you to obey, I will tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant.

Then in verse 28 Nehemiah relates that **Yoyada**, the son of the High Priest Elyashiv, married a foreign girl. In fact he married a daughter of Sanvalat, another of those antagonists who came against Nehemiah and the Jews and tried to prevent them from building the wall. This takes us full circle back to earlier in our lesson where we discussed that what we're witnessing here in

all these sins is that it was a top-down affair. The leadership did these detestable things first, and then the people followed suit. Nehemiah banished **Elyashiv's** son and daughter in law from Jerusalem. And then issued what amounted to a curse against them: "My God, remember them; because they have defiled the office of priest and the covenant of the priests and Levites.

It is hard to overstate how serious this matter of intermarriage was especially in the High Priest's family. One of his sons would have succeeded him; and then one of his grandsons after that. It is a nightmare scenario that the High Priest of Israel would have been the product of an illicit marriage. So Nehemiah was quite right to order this son away, partly no doubt to be made an example.

This chapter and book ends with a brief summary of all of Nehemiah's reforms. Verses 30 and 31 explain that first and foremost he purified the Priesthood and the Levites from foreign influences and then put these servants of God back to work in their Torah-ordained tasks. He saw to it that even the lowliest task, to provide wood for the altar fire, was accomplished because while it may have seemed like a menial job there was nothing more important than the operation of the Altar so that sins might be atoned for.

Nehemiah well knew that making Israel distinct from all other nations and people was paramount. Not better; not superior; just set apart. God had chosen Israel to be His people, just as those of us who are not born of Israel may be included as among His chosen by being grafted in through faith in Israel's Messiah, Yeshua of Nazareth. We, too, have been set apart by God, and we are to behave as set apart. If Believers should ever become completely indistinguishable from the rest of world, we could no longer function as God's servant, which is the most favored status and occupation anyone could ever hope for.

Leviticus 20:26 CJB ²⁶ Rather, you people are to be holy for me; because I, ADONAI, am holy; and I have set you apart from the other peoples, so that you can belong to me.

This ends our study of Nehemiah, and our long journey through the Torah and the Tanach, the Old Testament.